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Building Bridges: Enlightening Foreign Correspondents Through The Virtual Classroom

Currently, no model exists for providing lifelong learning opportunities to foreign correspondents. This paper provides a rationale and framework for the development of a foreign correspondent's Internet learning network model which could facilitate structured and semi-structured professional development opportunities. In this context, a discussion of the literature in relation to lifelong learning, the virtual classroom and computer-mediated communication is provided. Sustained exposure to and participation in such a network would provide foreign correspondents with opportunities to enhance their cultural knowledge, sensitivity and perspective and could provide support to what is often a socially, culturally and personally isolating role.

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As quickly as a new era of high-speed information exchange is ushering in dramatic changes to the ways in which we communicate, so too is the role of the foreign correspondent changing with the times. International news reportage in the Asia-Pacific, as in the rest of the world, is experiencing substantial shifts in professional practice. Greater emphasis is being placed on the bottom line due to factors including the corporatisation of news, Asian currency problems and cost-cutting measures implemented as international media magnates spread the tentacles of their empires around the globe.

Satellite technology, laptop computers and the ease of portability of digital equipment for broadcast journalists have also had a profound impact on the way in which foreign correspondents carry out their work. The result has been an increase in the trend towards dispatching foreign correspondents to far-flung locales only when a story is considered big enough to top the global news agenda. This trend began in the 1970s as the jet aeroplane, combined with satellite technology, resulted in the

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birth of the 'parachute reporter' – a new breed of journalist "just off the jet, there for a day or two, who knew little about the territory or people involved" (Kalb 1997: 140).

For the purposes of this paper, the term foreign correspondent is defined as a print, electronic or broadcast news journalist tasked with explaining and contextualising issues and events for an audience that resides beyond the borders of the nation or culture in question. Similarly, Starck and Villanueva (1992: 3) also define the term foreign correspondent as "media personnel who report and interpret the actions and events of different societies for a selected audience of readers not native to the country".

The role that foreign correspondents play in interpreting cultures and societies for their audiences should not be underestimated. Essentially, the foreign correspondent takes on a gatekeeping role "in the process of cultures communicating with and across cultures" (Starck and Villanueva 1992: 1). In doing so, she or he holds the key to forming the audience's ideas and interpretations of other cultures (Starck and Villanueva 1992).

The fact that the the foreign correspondent's role is currently in a state of flux should not be cause for alarm. It should, however, underscore the need for foreign correspondents to be committed to the process of lifelong learning. According to Beller and Or (1998: 2), "increasing competition, the need to keep up-to-date professionally, along with a rising standard of living and more leisure time, have combined to make studying an ongoing process – lifelong learning". The 'parachute reporter' phenomenon highlights the need for journalists to participate in a lifelong learning process through which they may provide breadth and depth to their cultural and social knowledge and competencies. The very nature of the foreign correspondent's work is unsuited to traditional learning environments, making the challenge of lifelong learning more complex.

This paper will argue that computer-mediated communication (CMC) and the virtual classroom have the potential to meet the lifelong education needs of foreign correspondents. The flexibility of online distance learning, combined with the interactivity of various modes of CMC, provide an excellent foundation for a foreign correspondent's Internet learning network model. This paper will define CMC and the virtual classroom, as well as examine the changing role of the foreign correspondent. The need for cultural awareness and lifelong learning in the profession will also be discussed. Finally, after surveying the literature on CMC, this paper will illustrate how new learning technologies and approaches could allow foreign correspondents to remain competitive by making regular

Lifelong Learning

social, cultural and political deposits into their international knowledge banks.

Lifelong learning is a concept which was popularised in the late 1960s and in recent years has re-emerged as an important issue not only in education but in the wider social and economic context (Cornford 1999; Levin 1998; Jarvis 1999). Sometimes called 'recurrent education' (Levin 1998: 201), lifelong learning refers to "a system of learning opportunities of both a formal and informal nature which participants can choose among to meet societal and personal needs and the individual learner over the entire life cycle". Hake (1999) describes the traditional notion of lifelong learning as the organized provision of education and training intended to transmit knowledge and skills, albeit in a more flexible fashion throughout life. He contends that a more accurate view of lifelong learning is one that recognises the active acquisition and application of knowledge and skills in all forms of social interaction in a process that is constructed by learners themselves.

In the Australian context, Cornford (1999) contends that lifelong learning has re-emerged as an important issue in education under the impact of successive waves of technological change. He cites the efforts of UNESCO's report on education for the 21st century and the OECD's research on the financial benefits of lifelong learning for nations as important catalysts in refocussing the interest of governments in fostering lifelong learning. Indeed, Hake (1999) argues that lifelong learning is becoming a necessary condition of survival.

CMC In Context

Computer-mediated communication (CMC) would provide the main platform on which a virtual classroom environment for foreign correspondents could be built. CMC can be described as communication between two or more persons, which is facilitated and mediated by computers and computer networks. It encompasses all forms of synchronous (simultaneous) or asynchronous (not coinciding or occurring at the same time) communication including electronic mail, electronic billboards, and the various forms of computer conferencing. CMC is usually text-based, however, it can contain graphics, video and audio communication. This paper contends that the Internet is a feasible and suitable network through which to conduct an active learning environment could be facilitated for foreign correspondents.

The virtual classroom is a teaching and learning environment located within a CMC system (Hiltz 1997). Rather than being built of steel and concrete, it consists of a set of group

communication and work 'spaces' and facilities that are constructed in software. Thus it is a 'virtual' facility for interaction among the members of a class, rather than a physical space (Hiltz 1997).

The most widely used forms of CMC in learning contexts are electronic mail (email), electronic billboards (discussion lists or newsgroups) and Internet relay chat (IRC). Satellite video conferencing is also used although not as extensively as the other modes due to expense and relatively complex technical requirements. Email is defined as a text message, sometimes with text or other files attached, composed by an individual and sent to single or multiple recipients through local networks or Internet Service Providers. The electronic billboard is an asynchronous mode of CMC, which can be likened to a billboard, on which messages are posted at any time on a topic related to the subject area of that particular discussion group. The newsgroup can be accessed and utilised at any time by its subscribers. In this context, an instructor would manage or oversee the student discussion group as part of his or her course-management duties. IRC facilitates synchronous discussions between two or more geographically dispersed individuals in virtual 'rooms'.

In his recent work on lifelong learning, Levin (1998) contends that new learning opportunities have been generated by new communication technologies and these have and could be adapted to lifelong learning. "Such technologies will provide great individualisation and flexibility in learning conditions and adaptation to individual time schedules and training needs" (1998: 206).

This paper explores the flexible nature of CMC and its usefulness as a tool with which to build a foreign correspondents' Internet learning network. Such an innovation is long overdue and has the potential to meet the needs of globetrotting foreign correspondents, particularly at a time when their profession is in a state of rapid evolution.

Until the 1960s, foreign correspondents were mainly based in a small sprinkling of capital cities. The growing prominence of the Third World and non-aligned nations, viewed in the context of the cold war, broadened news agendas, thus shifting attentions to other parts of the world. According to Utley (1997: 4), this meant, "correspondents could no longer remain in familiar capitals working their traditional sources". Similarly, "the jet plane made it possible for print and broadcast news organisations to bypass and later dismiss veteran journalists, bureau chiefs who had lived in their areas of coverage and who spoke the languages" (Kalb

Changing Role Of Foreign Correspon- dents

1997: 139).

With the creation of faster aeroplanes in the 1970s came changing attitudes in newsrooms. Foreign editors could no longer justify the high cost of maintaining foreign bureaus around the world. Combined with the possibility that satellite communications offered for same-day coverage, "the incentive for reporters and camera crews to race off to breaking stories in remote locations" increased significantly. (Utley 1997: 4) Indeed, a journalist working out of London could jet around the continent and beyond to cover several stories in one week, as Utley (1997: 4) testifies from his own experience as an American network news correspondent:

On a Monday morning of a quiet news period, I had no plans to leave the city. By Saturday, I had covered South Moluccans seizing hostages in the Netherlands, the Israeli incursion to the Litani River in southern Lebanon, and the kidnapping of Prime Minister Aldo Moro in Rome, and had returned home – three stories in three countries on two continents in five days.

There is a danger in this ongoing trend. Starck and Villanueva (1992) argue that 'parachute journalism' does not allow foreign correspondents to operate with cultural understanding and sensitivity when they are sent in to interpret events in a foreign milieu.

Another shift in foreign news coverage came with the end of the cold war. Just as the Berlin Wall came tumbling down, so too did newsroom expenditures on international news coverage. Utley (1997: 4) argues that the cold war kept news viewers interested in global affairs because as long as two superpowers were aiming nuclear weapons at one another, "the question of personal security took on an international dimension". With the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the collapse of the communist threat, viewer interest in world affairs has declined. And so news editors have been pushed to the "conclusion that foreign news is expendable unless it is of compelling interest to a mass audience" (Utley 1997: 7).

Given the decline in interest in international affairs, the push to reduce foreign news expenditures has also led to broadcasters forming alliances to pool footage and has contributed to the expanding practice of news agencies providing copy and tape to media outlets around the world. While news organisations have experienced significant cost-savings by employing such strategies, the end result means sacrificing "the depth and perspective that an on-the-scene report can provide" (Utley 1997: 7). Indeed, the process of understanding issues and events grounded in the intricacies of one culture with its own history and social fabric is

a difficult one, particularly when the role of the foreign correspondent is to translate that information into the cultural context of his or her own nation (Starck and Villanueva 1992). Without independent on-the-ground journalists, this pooling of information and news products is likely to result in news reports that are short on context and cultural understanding.

Of equal importance when examining the changing role of the foreign correspondent is the increase in computer usage among those in the journalism profession. Researchers have been tracking the use of newsroom computers for information gathering, data analysis and record searching for several years (Friend 1994; Davenport et al. 1996). One of the early researchers into the adoption of computer-assisted reporting has also made great strides in studying the increasing use of the Internet and other interactive media by journalists. (Garrison 1997a, 1997b) Garrison's findings have pointed to a steady rise in the use of online sources in the United States and a strong belief by journalists that such sources can be valuable research tools. (1997a, 1997b) Quinn's research into Internet usage by Australian journalists (1999: 5) has found that total usage by both metropolitan and regional reporters has "risen markedly" since 1997. Quinn also found that metropolitan daily newspapers have significantly increased the number of Internet-connected terminals in their newsrooms.

Widespread usage of the Internet is also playing a role in changing foreign reporting practices by creating a new kind of news consumer. Armed with a computer and modem, those interested in world affairs have access to more information than today's cable news channels can churn out in a 24-hour period (Utley 1997). 'Information age' news consumers are in fact more informed than traditional news audiences. A *Times-Mirror* survey found that "computer-users tend to read more newspapers, books and magazines than others" and have a strong thirst for news and information (Davis 1994: 24).

Similarly, a wide variety of online news organisations are contributing to the creation of interactive news audiences by providing discussion groups and chat rooms where news consumers can ask questions or offer their own comment on the day's news. The impact of such practices on the future role of the foreign correspondent will be highly significant:

[They] will have to be versatile and informed journalists who can write commentary for videotape as well as for print, knowledgeable specialists who closely follow a country, region, or topic and can appear on camera or online to talk about it and respond to questions [from]... an audience [who] ... will be informed, engaged, and more

Importance Of Cultural Knowledge

demanding than the passive television viewers of today.
(Utley 1997: 9)

Clearly, a depth and breadth of cultural, social, political and historical knowledge will be required for the foreign correspondent of the future to keep up with a global audience that is increasingly demanding and informed about world affairs. In order to achieve such objectives, journalists will need to continually develop their knowledge and understanding.

Reportage that is sensitive to the social, cultural and political characteristics that define nations is getting lost as a result of changing practices and technological advances. Audiences will emerge the real losers if context and meaning disappear in superficial news reports. It is therefore essential that attention be given to the role that culture plays in the foreign correspondent's work:

[F]oreign correspondents are among the first important cultural framers of events... [R]esulting accounts inevitably end up with differing intentions, meanings and importance. Readers or viewers take these cultural frames and ... impose their own cultural frames in the interpretive process. (Starck and Villanueva 1992: 7).

Given the gatekeeping function of foreign correspondents, Starck and Villanueva (1992: 29) caution that those without the appropriate cultural knowledge run the risk of interpreting events erroneously and "enforcing stereotypes and ethnocentrism".

In their study, Starck and Villanueva (1992) conducted in-depth interviews with six foreign correspondents with the aim of unearthing "how they felt culture figured in their work". Their interviews revealed that "lack of cultural preparation" and "lack of cultural sensitivity" were common problems cited by foreign correspondents. In addition, several respondents criticised journalism education for not including cultural sensitivity training in the curriculum. According to the authors (1992: 30), "in terms of education, it is clear that more attention should be given to the role of culture in reporting".

The Need For Lifelong Learning

Achieving the goal of implementing all-encompassing cultural-sensitivity training in journalism education is unrealistic. Lifelong learning is a more feasible approach in that it facilitates a process whereby these 'parachute reporters' may continually build on their international knowledge by obtaining social, cultural, political and historical information as and when it is needed. In the tradition of lifelong learning, knowledge is gained

incrementally and may or may not have immediate currency in the journalist's work environment.

Unlike many of their predecessors who had years to research, understand and interpret a new cultural milieu, modern foreign correspondents are forced to equip themselves with the political, social, cultural and historical background to an international story in a matter of hours, a few days or sometimes weeks if the story is developing over time. Reporters working out of London, Bangkok or Jakarta, for example, run the serious risk of living in a cultural vacuum if they are not given the opportunity for cultural exchange and ongoing acquisition of in-depth knowledge that can most effectively be gained through lifelong learning.

In today's international reporting environment, it is crucial that foreign correspondents remain competitive with their peers as well as meet the expectations of an increasingly demanding and informed public. While it is true that the busy work and travel schedules of foreign correspondents leave little time for professional development, it is an aspect of the job that simply cannot be overlooked due to lack of time.

According to Hiltz (1997), the virtual classroom is an environment that is particularly well-suited to the process of collaborative learning, which is integral to adult learning and professional development. This collaborative process is effectively facilitated among and between students and instructors, among teachers and between a class and wider academic and non-academic communities. Such an environment would help meet the lifelong learning needs of foreign correspondents. "For distance education students, the increased ability to be in constant communication with other learners is obvious... the technology provides a means for a rich, collaborative learning environment that exceeds the traditional classroom in its ability to 'connect' students and course materials on a round-the-clock basis" (Hiltz 1997: 2).

A number of researchers have identified CMC and distance learning as the vehicles of the future for fulfilling the needs of lifelong learning and professional development (Beller and Or 1998). Anderson and Kanuka (1997: 4) argue that such computer-mediated learning offers "an opportunity for professionals to improve the way they increase their unique body of knowledge through a critical and analytical process of acquiring, practicing and adopting new knowledge".

Cervero (1988) proposes that professional development is best achieved through accessing the accumulated knowledge of

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other professionals in a process which can "yield a fresh exchange of ideas, practices, and solutions to common problems" (cited in Anderson and Kanuka 1997: 4). CMC is well suited to the goal of providing foreign correspondents with ongoing learning opportunities, as it has the potential to break down cultural barriers by encouraging cross-cultural exchanges with correspondents of other nationalities and experts around the globe. However, as Bertram (1999) acknowledges, the movement to online learning often means that education may be reduced to navigating courses divorced from any context of a social institution beyond that provided by an electronic community with limited functions.

There exists a higher risk now more than ever of foreign correspondents not being able to report sensitively or even accurately due to gaps in their knowledge that cannot be closed in the time available. Such gaps might effectively be addressed by using the Internet as an 'any time, any place' learning medium. Anderson and Kanuka argue that "this innovation has the potential to become a widespread medium for continuing professional education" (1997: 1). The authors claim that the Internet has "the capacity to support collaboration, reflection, and professional development, as well as to overcome barriers of time and place", thereby making "the use of online forums a potentially useful and cost effective innovation" (1997: 2).

Overall, there tends to be a view in existing literature that computer-mediated learning can be particularly effective and desirable in those contexts where there are no alternative opportunities for contact and interaction or where it supplements other methods of contact. It is an especially useful tool for those who fall outside the traditional modes of education delivery.

The advent of the Internet and CMC has created avenues for information dissemination of which everyone is aware. But just as the outdated, inaccurate and wasteful 'mass market' concept has long been abandoned in favour of micro and niche marketing, the customisation and specialisation of Internet-facilitated services according to specific markets or user categories is now well underway. Many foreign correspondents are already making extensive use of Internet services and computer-based communication technologies. Understanding how they make use of these would be an important first step in establishing the shape and form of a learning network that invites and includes the participation of relevant experts. In this way, the foreign correspondent's discourse within a culture could and should begin before the next plane is ever boarded.

While language is obviously the most significant barrier to meaningful cross-cultural communication in any context, CMC

included, there is evidence that it is a more effective medium for communication between heterogeneous groups of individuals. CMC lacks the usual cues in relation to both the individuals engaged in communication and the context within which they exist, and de-emphasises the differences that are so often barriers to communication. In their study of a CMC-facilitated learning environment, Chester and Gwynne (1998: 5) observed that "interactions across cultural groups seemed to take place more easily online ... students talked about forming relationships across cultural boundaries when in real life they felt more comfortable within their own cultural group".

CMC is especially useful in contexts where its introduction adds an opportunity for extensive interpersonal interaction that did not previously exist. While face-to-face learning environments are still generally assumed to be better than discussion lists, newsgroups or the various other forms of online forums, Hiltz (1997) argues that these forums may even be superior facilitators of effective learning, particularly collaborative learning, than the traditional face-to-face environment.

While the study of CMC is still in its infancy relative to other disciplines, there is a growing body of knowledge from which three issues of particular relevance to this discussion can be drawn:

- That CMC can facilitate rich interpersonal interaction;
- That CMC can facilitate both task and social interaction and that the results can be as good as, if not better than, alternative forms of communication including face-to-face;
- That CMC may reduce the impact of status and therefore encourage participation that is more egalitarian in nature than alternative forms of communication including face-to-face. This is an important factor in the context of cross-cultural communication.

According to Parks (1996), social presence and social context cues theories predict that online communication should be more impersonal, less inhibited and less adaptive than face-to-face communication. However, Fulk et al (1987: 529) point out that many CMC studies have demonstrated that this low-social-presence medium is frequently used to communicate messages which are "highly emotional and interpersonally involving". This is an important consideration in the development of a foreign correspondent's Internet learning network, as it points to the possibility that exchanges between participants will be frank and

Functionality of CMC

Inter- Personal Interaction

contribute to breaking down interpersonal and intercultural barriers.

CMC can be a relatively slow means of exchanging information relative to face-to-face and other means of communicating. However, the quality of that exchange as determined by ideas generated, problems resolved and issues extracted, can be as good as, if not better than, those generated using more traditional forms of communication (Walther 1996). Similarly, an analysis of face-to-face versus computer-mediated decision-making by Condon and Cech (1996) reveals that participants used fewer words to communicate messages, omitting unnecessary linguistic material and consequently making what they said more efficient and more likely to accomplish more than one function. This is particularly encouraging in light of the need for foreign correspondents to make the most valuable use of their learning time.

CMC does not convey as much information as face-to-face communication about the participant's socio-economic status, physical attributes, gender, age and location, among other things. It can, however, lead to judgements about other participants based on their ability to communicate in a text-based environment. Still, Sproull and Kiesler (1991) contend that CMC de-emphasises the impact of status and therefore might also increase people's consideration of minority views. "If minority opinions can enhance performance, then groups could be more effective when using computers to communicate" (Sproull and Kiesler 1991: 664). Similarly, Rice (1987) supports the view that reduced contextual cues tends to free such groups from some of the constraints of dyadic and group exchanges and concludes that CMC leads to more equity of participation and to the expression of more variable opinions.

Walther (1996) proposes that the de-individuating features of CMC such as visual anonymity, physical isolation and selective self-presentation, if paired with high group salience, leads to decreased perceptions of individual differences. Prashant (1997: 11) also argues that much of the research into CMC indicates that "CMC, when compared to FTF [face-to-face], is a more egalitarian medium, with greater equality of participation". Such findings support the argument for using CMC to provide lifelong learning opportunities to geographically and culturally dispersed foreign correspondents.

Initiating A Model

The virtual classroom is ideally suited to meet the needs of the foreign correspondent. Currently, no model exists for providing lifelong learning to foreign correspondents via the World Wide

Web. Therefore, the following will act as a starting point for the development of a foreign correspondent's Internet learning network model.

It is the authors' contention that the most effective approach to developing such a network would involve cooperation between professional associations, educational institutions and senior or retired foreign correspondents representing all corners of the globe. Such a network would operate through a foreign correspondent's Internet learning network 'shopfront' on the World Wide Web. The shopfront would give members access to online education opportunities either in the form of structured courses or a self-directed learning platform. Courses and learning opportunities would cover all regions and countries of the globe and would offer in-depth instruction in society, economics, industry, culture, politics, history, geography and religion.

Foreign correspondents would have access to international experts in all relevant fields as instructors. Senior or retired foreign correspondents would also form part of the teaching team. It is imperative that a cross-section of instructors from western, newly-industrialised and developing nations be made available in order to offer participants the breadth and depth of knowledge that can only be gained through such an approach. This would also allow for a cross-pollination of ideas, understandings and techniques to take place. Instruction would be further facilitated through the use of asynchronous CMC tools such as discussion groups that would offer foreign correspondents access to teaching staff as well as to one another. This would be particularly beneficial, as research supports the view that such an approach encourages intercultural exchange and further professional development.

As well as offering participants access to tuition, the foreign correspondent's Internet learning network shopfront would also streamline and simplify the acquisition of knowledge by developing a global network of relevant information sources. In addition, members of the network would be able to participate in weekly virtual roundtables to discuss the reportage and non-reportage of issues and events on each continent.

The virtual classroom offers the benefit of learning that is neither time nor place dependent, thus meeting the needs of the foreign correspondent's demanding and often unpredictable work and travel schedule. Journalists could tap into the network from virtually any location – at work, at home or in a hotel room. Online learning provides the flexibility that face-to-face teaching and structured training sessions cannot.

Inherent in any model of this kind are some obvious limits including a lack of access to equipment and resources in some developing nations, problems of authenticity and cross-cultural

barriers to acceptance. Researchers have also pointed out that the virtual learning experience still falls short of completely immersing oneself in the culture and language of another country (Hutchison 1995). Others have indicated that online learning can encounter problems of cross-cultural acceptance and adjustment (Chester and Gwynne 1998).

Conclusion

Globally, media industries are making extensive use of computer communication technologies to sell existing products to existing markets and to reach new audiences in new ways. In so doing, the media are sustaining the financial prosperity and powerful positions they enjoy within many nations. In this context, it is important to consider the benefits of adding value to the talent that feeds an important part of the media machine.

The purpose of this paper is not to devise the definitive professional development environment for foreign correspondents but merely to suggest that the need for the investment in lifelong learning exists. While traditional modes of learning delivery have been inadequate to meet the extensive needs of this group, the technologies and services facilitated by the Internet have brought opportunities that should be explored.

Having moved on from traditional concepts of the role of the *foreign correspondent* we need to understand more about the profession's current needs and limitations. There appears to be ample scope for the development of a learning network that draws together new and existing resources. Given that this is neither a vast nor a growing professional specialty, such research is feasible but only with the support of the foreign correspondents themselves and their various employers.

The question of whether it is necessary and appropriate to structure courses as such or to simply provide a self-directed learning platform needs to be considered in undertaking such research. This and many other questions need to be posed to the 'community' of foreign correspondents. A foreign correspondent's Internet learning network could provide this high-profile but largely under-served segment of professional news gatherers with a social and interpersonal network in a non-threatening environment that has not previously existed – expatriate communities notwithstanding.

The foreign correspondent's Internet learning network could facilitate rich interpersonal interaction with peers and experts with whom an invaluable knowledge resource resides. Such a vehicle would promote 'any time, any place' learning using relatively simple and widely available technology. Learning and communicating within the Internet environment is also

potentially less inhibited by the preconceptions that differences in status, gender, race, ethnicity and other factors engender. In such an environment there is enormous potential for sharing, on an on-going basis, professional and cultural experiences with peers and other experts. Sustained exposure to and participation in such a process would provide foreign correspondents with opportunities to enhance their cultural knowledge, sensitivity and perspective. Ultimately, it is hoped that such interaction would help participating journalists to produce more accurate, better quality reports. Finally, such a network could supplement and support the foreign correspondent in what is often a socially, culturally and personally isolating role.

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